UJOWACS

University of Uyo Journal of Women Academics

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF WOMEN IN ACADEMICS
UNIVERSITY OF UYO CHAPTER
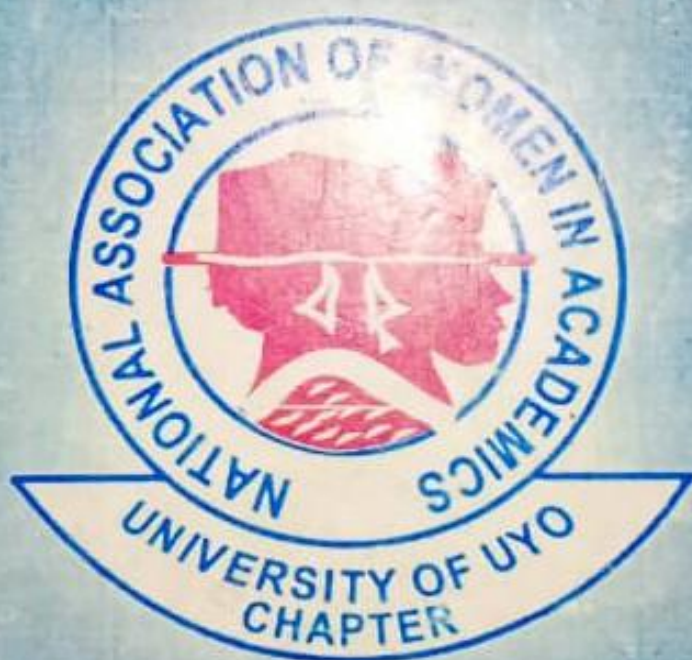
Motto: *Empowerment, Development and Excellence*

August 2000

CHILD DEVELOPMENT THROUGH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: THE IBIBIO EXPERIENCE

BY

BASSEY OKON
Department of Languages and Linguistics, University of Calabar

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the Ibibio experience of child development through language acquisition. Language acquisition is a process where a child gains by skill or ability or by one's own efforts or behaviour the capability to use language. Six children and six mothers of Ibibio speaking origin living in Cross River State were randomly selected. They were observed and interviewed in order to provide answers to the following research questions:

(a) How does the Ibibio child acquire the language?

(b) For what purpose does the Ibibio child acquire the language?

It is assumed that the answers to these questions will give an insight into the language development of the Ibibio child as he/she expresses his/her feelings and needs as well as maintain his/her identity in the society.

INTRODUCTION

Language in a system of human expression by means of words. A particular system of words as used by a people or a nation. It is a medium of expression to express one's needs, thought and feelings. For a child to communicate with the adults, he/she needs to acquire the language of his/her mother or the language of the immediate environment – in this case – Ibibio. The Ibibio language is spoken in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States.

Language acquisition is a process where a child gains by skills or ability or by one's own efforts or behaviour, the capability to use language as the child is exposed to the language. Language acquisition involves the chronological development of the mother tongue or the first language in children. The stages of language development starts from the 'prelinguistic' to the 'Linguistics' level (Clark 1992).

A child in this work is defined as a young person who is within the age range of 2 – 4 years and such a person is capable of adapting to his/her environment. This child, is able to acquire any language within his/her society. A brief discussion of the theories of language acquisition is relevant to observe how the Ibibio child is able to acquire his/her language in order to express his feelings.

THEORIES OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITIONS

There are several theories of language acquisition namely: Lennerberg's – Biological theory, Skinner's – Behaviourist, Chomsky's Mentalist theory, Piaget's maturational theory among others. Some of these theories that affect the work are briefly discussed. Piaget, a psychologist studies the process of behaviour patterning (learning), in human

beings. Using man from birth, Piaget divides the pattern into 4 stages and corresponding periods. In this work, we will only make use of the first two stages.

THE PROCESS OF BEHAVIOUR PATTERNING (LEARNING) IN HUMAN BEING

STAGES	CORRESPONDING PERIOD	EVENTS
1. Sensory motor	Birth – 20 months	A child gathers impression from the world around him, learns to pattern it and to act in a variety of ways in relation to his experience.
2. Pre-operational	2 – 6 years of age	Language development is the dominant factor here with new found use of words, they express their feelings about the environment in which they live. Prominent here is the use of trial and error phenomenon and the use of intuition to solve various problems.

Source: K. V. Rizzo and B. G Suran (1979).

On the other hand, the behaviourist theory states that the human mind is not important in the acquisition or learning of a language. Rather that the child's mind develops as the child becomes exposed to the language and only then does the child acquire a language. To the behaviourist, there is need for experience in order that language acquisition and learning may take place. This acquisition can take place through listening and imitating people. They learn to speak by copying utterances heard around them and having their responses strengthened by the repetitions, corrections and other reactions of adults (Crystal, 1987).

Furthermore, he observes that imitation is a kind of 'bridge' – stop gap between comprehension and spontaneous production. Besides, the behavioursts say5y that human behaviour is dominated by the stimulus – response relationship. The behaviourist asserts that language acquisition is a proecess of imitation and reinforcement. The rate of acquisition depends on the responses being strengthened by adults since the process of acquisition is through imitation, the stimulus – response must be repeated until the repetition becomes habitual. The concept of reinforcement (reward) plays a major role in the process of language acquisition and learning. To them learning must be rewarded.

Apart from the two theories discussed, the mentalist theory which is a reaction to imitation and reinforcement emphasizes the creative mind with the intrinsic structures in mental operations. The focus on the creative mind deals with the brain as the most

important tool for acquisition and learning. A child is born with an innate capacity for language development: the human brain in 'ready' for language when the child is exposed to speech. The mentalist stress the mechanism (structure) and the process that take place in language acquisition and learning as well as the organization. This organization is based on the "innateness" idea known technically as the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), which is in born.

The notion of LAD is the inherited knowledge of the structure of human language possessed by human beings. It is observed that the child is born with the facilities to aid him/her acquire his/her language and the mind has the imprints of what language is like This possession is manifested when the child becomes exposed to the raw data of language. This implies that the child acquires a language in his/her environment by relating what he/she hears to his/her unconscious knowledge of the structure that underlies all language. In other words, the child uses LAD to make sense of the utterances heard around him/her as he/she devices this 'primary linguistic data' (Crystal 1987). This paper applies the mentalist theory by Chomsky which makes use of LAD, and effective process in language acquisition and will be shown in the next section of this work

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Two research questions were set and the answers to the questions are provided in the section under discussion.

(1) How does the Ibibio child acquire the language?
(2) For what purposes does the Ibibio child acquire thhe language?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This section gives an overview of the method by which this study was carried out

STUDY POPULATION

Children and mothers of Akwa Ibom origin who live in Cross River were randomly selected

STUDY SAMPLE

The study sample comprised five children and five mothers. They were selected through random sampling These children were chosen because their speeches were intelligible and they talked a lot. The mothers were chosen because it is believed they assist the children in their language development. This process where the mothers assist their children to develop is known as 'motherese' (Crystal 1987). 'Motherese' is a style of speech used by mothers when talking to their babies. It is characterized by such features as short sentences, repetitive discourse, simplified vocabulary and expressive intonation (Crystal 1992: 258). Motherese is used because it is a natural one and shows the importance of the role of mothers in early child development. There is a an expressive, effective element in 'motherese'.

PROCEDURE

The procedure for this work was through observation. The children and their mothers were in the natural environment – their homes. Questions were asked to elicit from mothers how the children acquired the language and for what purposes.

DISCUSSION

RESEARCH QUESTION 1

How does the Ibibio child acquire his/her language?

In language aacquisition, there are four stages of development viz: the babbling stage where the babbles and it helps the child the experiment on the vocal organs. Furthermore, the helophrastic stage also known as the one-word stage occurs usually after the first year through it varies from child to child. They know the sounds and how these sounds are related to meanings as they learn to produce their first words. (More on these later). Meanwhile the two-word stage occurs a little before or aafter the second birthday and the last stage known as the telegraphic stage occurs when the child is able to use from three to five words or more in a sentence.

Acquisition at the phonological level is taken to include the mastery of the phonemic and phonetic targets and these are illustrated in production. As observed by Kuhl and Meltzolf (1984) in Crystal 1987, they observed that children discriminate and respond to sounds in relation to voice. As shown in Tables 1 – 3 below:

Table 1a: SUBSTITUTION OF /k/ WITH /t/

	CHILD	ADULT	GLOSS
1.	atamu	akamu	pap (corn)
2.	atara	akara	bean ball
3.	utum	ukum	plantain
4.	ntanita	nkanika	clock
5.	itod	ukod	leg

In these examples, the Ibibio child hears and produces what he/she hears. As shown here, the child substitutes the voiceless velar /k/ sound with the voiceless dental /t/ sound. It would be assumed that the child finds it easier to produce the dental sound than the velar sound through both sounds are voiceless and these are stops.

Table 1b: SUBSTITUTION OF /f/ WITH /t/

	CHILD	ADULT	GLOSS
6.	atere	afere	soup
7.	atong	afong	dress
8.	utok	ufok	house

From examples in table 1b, the child substitutes the alveolar stop /t/ for the labio-dental fricative /f/. As already observed both sounds are voiceless sounds. This observation agrees with Crystal's (1987) assertion that children substitute stops for fricatives as shown in this example [ts] for see.

Table 2: REPLACEMENT OF VOWEL SOUNDS WITH ANOTHER VOWEL SOUND

	CHILD	ADULT	GLOSS
9.	idia	udia	food
10.	ito	eto	tree
11	isun	usung	door
12	ibok	ubok	hand
13.	ichan	usan	plate
14.	iwa	ewa	dog
15.	ibod	ebod	goat

A look at table 2 shows how the vowels are replaced. The back vowel /u/ in adult speech is replaced with a front vowel /i/. As shown in the examples this replacement occurs mainly at the initial position but not in any other environment as in example 9 – idia and 11 usung. In examples 14 and 15, it is observed that the /i/ replaces another front vowel /e/ In the last two examples, it is observed that the first vowel /i/ is higher than the vowel for which it is substituted for /e/ This is in agreement with Crystal's (1987) analysis that "children re-order adult words to suit them for example the preference of the first higher vowel than the second vowel"

	CHILD	ADULT	GLOSS
16.	nno	ino	thief
17	nnam	unam	meat
18.	nyak	iyak	fish
19.	nkim	ikim	urine

In these examples, the Ibibio child replaces the initial vowel sounds /i/ and /u/ with the nasal sound /n/. However, this writer would like to state that the acquisition of early words is not the same pattern for every Ibibio child. The reason is that each child develops his/her own less systematic way of rendering adult words within his own limited output repertoire of sound sequences. It this point, the child construct a mental picture of a world of objects that have independent existence. This ability to name classes of objects gives them 'permanent' linguistic status (Crystal, 1987)

GRAMMATICAL DEVELOPMENT

For grammatical development, the Ibibio child starts with uttering words as he/she progresses unto the production of phrases and sentences as he/she listens to the adult. Examples are shown below:

	CHILD	ADULT	GLOSS
20.	daiyada	dakada	stand up
21.	titua	k'utua	don't cry

In these examples, the child replaces the velar sound /k/ with a palatal approximant /y/. In addition the child changes a monothong into a dipthong. As observed by Menn (1992) "some bring in sounds into many words whether the sound is used by the adult or not, while some avoid some sounds". In example (21) the child does not understand the use of the apostrophe in sentences, he deletes the apostrophe as well as change the initial velar sound /k/ to a voiceless stop /t/.

The following sentences as shown below are uttered by the Ibibio children in his/her process of development as the child acquires the Ibibio language.

	CHILD	**ADULT**	**GLOSS**
22	tuk isun	kʌk usung	close the door
23.	wǫŋ mmǫŋ	ŋwǫŋ mmǫŋ	I want to drink water
24.	mama nyon ndi	mama ayon edi	Mama is back
25	ata utok Abasi	aka ufok Abais	He/she has gone to Church
26.	mi nde	imi nde	I sleep
27.	tu mia mi	ku mia mi	Do not beat me
28.	aye eta mi	ayen ekami	My brother/sister
29.	Mama idim te dep	Mama edim ke dep	Mama, it is raining
30.	Nya tine atong mi	Nya sine afong mi	I will wear my dres

From these it is observed that the sentences made have adult syntax pattern. Example 22 shows how action affects an object whereas examples 24 – 26 show how actions are performed. In these examples utterances are simplified in relation to grammar and meanings. Sentences are short and restricted and the parents adapt their language to suit the child for interaction and learning.

SEMANTIC DEVELOPMENT

The acquisition of vocabulary occurs in the early months of language acquisition. Lexical growth continues steadily and it starts with the first word both in comprehension and production. It is – stated that a child of one year acquires 10 – 50 words in production and this yields an acquisition level of about 10 new words a month. For comprehension, the child acquires an average of 22 now words each month. Besides the child speak about 50 words and understands about 5 times as many (Benedict 1979 in Crystal 1987). The content of early vocabulary are things going on around them – the 'here and now' (See examples given in earlier pages). However, these different levels of development do not occur singly. There is simultaneous development of sounds, grammar, meaning and interaction skills. By 3 years, the child learns aspects of conversational strategy. He/she can initiate a dialogue and has ways of obtaining and holdings listener's attention.

It is observed that though the children may have the same number of vocabulary, they differ in the range of words used and in their meanings. It is worthy to note that a child's achievement in language acquisition should commensurate the age of the child. As

observed by Brown and Bellugi (1972) "the average length of utterance". Furthermore, there is a correlation between the mean length of utterance (MLU) and the age of the child. The mean length of utterances shows grammatical development. To find the average, the total number of utterances are divided by the total number of words (Brown 1960 in Crystal 1987). It was observed that the children gradually increased their utterance length. The meanings are concrete and are related to the situation in which the children and others are acting. The child acquires the language through listening, imitation and repetition.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2

For what purposes do the Ibibio child acquire the language? Language as already stated is a means of communication and the Ibibio child acquires the language in order to communicate and adapt to the environment in which he/she finds him/herself. As observed by Stones (1981), "Man's use of language makes such a profound difference to his adaptation to his environment because he used it as a symbol systems". Furthermore, the acquisition of the language provides the child with a sense of belonging and identification within a speech community.

Another function of language acquisition enables the child to name things that he/she has direct contact with (See the examples given). That is, they are able to use language to set up relationships between concepts, ideas and things. As observed by Luria quoted by Stone:

> ... through the symbolizing properties of language children learn a much more complex adaptation to the environment than they would otherwise.
> ... they are able to manipulate whole groups of concepts in complex ways so as to set up rules by which they regulate their behaviour.

This quotation implies that the child sets rules for him/herself that enable him/her to fit into the society as he/she interacts with his/her peers and the adults

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The following pedagogical implication are noted:

(1) Organisation of learning should be around the Ibibio language for the whole class and also in small groups.

(2) Teachers should be adequately trained in using Ibibio language to teach.

(3) These must be a change in the language policy which only allows Ibibio to be used in the 1st three years in teaching.

(4) Teachers should know the nature, the rules and values of the language.

(5) Constant workshops and in-service training programmes

(6) Review of curriculum considering both content and methodology must be done regularly.

CONCLUSION

Language acquisition is the process whereby a child imbibes a language and is able to use the language for survival within the society he/she finds him/herself. The Ibibio child acquires language to commensurate with his chronological age. This acquisition of his/her language enables him/her to express his emotions and needs. This natural development in a child occurs as the child matures. He/she is able to develop as the different levels of language develop simultaneously. Language acquisition provides the child with an identity within a community. It acts as a passport into the adult society.

From the work done, we agree with Crystal (1987) that 'acquiring a language involves two distinct skills – the ability to produce speech in a spontaneous way: and the ability to understand the speech of others. The children under study have proved the above assertion in their process of development. This kind of development is not peculiar to Ibibio children alone but it is a common phenomenon with developing children.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bright, W (1992) (ed.) *International Encyclopedia of Linguistic.* Vol. 1 New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brown, R and U Bellugi (1972) "There process in the child's acquisition of syntax". In A Casdan and E. Grugeon (ed.) *Language in Education: A Source Book.* London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul with the Open University Press pp 136 – 144.

Clark, E V (1992) "Acquisition of Language" In Bright, W (ed.) pp 10 – 19.

Collinge, N E (1990) (ed.) An *Encyclopaedia of Language,* London and New York: Routledge

Crystal, D (1987) *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Crystal, D (1992) *An Encyclopaedia Dictionary of Language and Languages.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Fromkin, V and Rodman (1928) *An Introduction to Language* 2nd ed., New York: Rinehart & Winston Inc.

Kessler, C (1984) *"Language Acquisition in Bilingual Children"* In N Miller (1984) (ed.) *Bilingualism and Language Disability: Assessment and Remediation.* London: Chapman & Hall Ltd.

Larsen-Freeman, D and M H Long (1991), *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research* London: Longman.

Liles, R L (1975) *An Introduction to Linguistics.* Eaglewood Cliffs & New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc.

Luria, A R (1972) "Development of the directive function of speech in early children". In A Cashdan & E Grugeon (ed.) pp 150 – 155.

McNeill, D (1972) "The Creation of Language". In A Cashdan & E Grugeon ed. Pp 145-149.

Menn, L (1992) "Second Language Acquisition" In W Bright (ed.).

Rizzo, T V and B G Suran (1979) *Special Children: An Integrative Approach.* Glenview; Scott: Foresman & Company.

Stones, E (1981) *Learning and Teaching: A Programmed Introduction.* Chichester: John Wiley and Sons.

Strange, B M H (1970) *A History of English.* London: Methuen.